

23 Mar. 2016: General Breedlove, Ministry of Defense, Tbilisi, Georgia Transcript.

BREEDLOVE:

First of all, it's great to be back in Tbilisi. I appreciate the warm hospitality of Minister Khidasheli and her team, and I thank you for the opportunity to highlight today the strong relationship we enjoy between U.S. European Command, NATO and our strategic partners in Georgia.

Before I address my visit here, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the tragic events in Brussels yesterday. My thoughts and prayers go out to all those impacted by these horrible terror attacks. We strongly condemn these attacks and will continue to stand by Belgium, our NATO Allies and partners to defeat these terrorists who threaten our freedoms and our way of life.

Now, to my visit here. The security situation across Europe continues to evolve and become more and more complex. We continue to face security direct challenges from two directions. To the East, we face a resurgent, aggressive Russia, which has voluntarily chosen to be an adversary and poses an aggressive and long-term threat to the United States and our European allies and partners.

To the South...Europe faces the daunting challenge of mass migration, spurred by state instability and collapse...and masking the movement of criminals, terrorists, and foreign fighters. As a result of conflict in the region "Daesh" – is spreading like a cancer, taking advantage of paths of least resistance, threatening European nations – and our own – with terrorist attacks. Its brutality is driving millions to flee from Syria, and Iraq...creating an unprecedented humanitarian challenge.

As we work with allies and partners to respond and overcome both of these serious threats, we stand fully behind Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Today I was privileged to visit the Administrative Boundary Line with your Chief of Defense and our Ambassador. There I witnessed the illegitimate division of the Georgian people. As your brave, valiant nation has witnessed first-hand, Russia continues to seek to extend its coercive and corrosive influence on its periphery, and now it is also trying to re-establish a leading – and aggressive – role on the world stage. Russia ultimately seeks to overturn the established rules and principles of the international system, fracture the unity of the free world, and to challenge our resolve.

NATO is privileged to have a steadfast partner like Georgia that continues to be an extremely valuable contributor to international security, and as we all know is the second largest contributor of troops to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. Through these deployments, Georgia is playing an important role in maintaining international peace and security. We are extremely grateful to the Georgian people for being such a committed provider of international security. The US military and Georgian Armed Forces have served together side-by-side for more than 15 years in international security missions. Both of our militaries know what it means to be brothers-in-arms in today's increasingly complex security situation. The current efforts of the United States military assistance in Georgia are focused on strengthening Georgia's self-defense capabilities as well as deepening further Georgia interoperability with NATO. Our goal is that Georgia be as prepared as possible, so that once NATO is ready to go, Georgia will be ready to go as well.

To reiterate, the United States supports Georgia's aspirations to join the NATO Alliance. This has been our position since the 2008 Bucharest Summit.

We greatly look forward to our upcoming joint exercises with Georgia, which will further strengthen our partnership and bring Georgia even closer to our standards. Both the “Noble Partner” and “Agile Spirit” exercises will enhance our ability to inter-operate with NATO partners like Georgia that is contributing forces to NATO's Response Force. In May, Noble Partner 2016 will bring Georgian, U.S. and UK soldiers together at Vaziani Training Area for three weeks to exercise our respective NATO Response Force capabilities. And it will be bigger and better than last year's Noble Partner exercise.

Finally, I've gone way too long. I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to you, Madam Minister, to the people of Georgia, and especially to the valiant Georgian troops for their selfless sacrifice alongside NATO Allies and partners in our shared security missions around the world. We have long served together for peace and security in dangerous theaters, and in the process we have forged very close bonds. Georgia is a noble partner indeed, and we look forward to deepening our partnership to promote a safer, more secure future for both of our countries and nations.

Thank you, again, Ma'am.